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- THE MAGAZINE WITH A FOCUS ON CULTURE -

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**Monique Wittig:** doing violence to language, denaturalizing sex  
(*Dans l'arène ennemie. Texts and interviews, 1966-1999*)



Caption from Monique Wittig's open letter to Maria Velho da Costa, published in A Capital on June 13, 1974.

*Dans l'arène ennemie*, the beautiful, powerful and elegant volume of Monique Wittig's writings published by Éditions de Minuit, reads like a cartography of the struggles in which the feminist and lesbian writer and theorist, born in 1935 and deceased in 2003, took part. We can't help but hear echoes of two other titles: *L'ennemi principal*, the founding article and two-volume work by Christine Delphy, who worked with Wittig in the early days of the feminist movement in the 1970s - before a brutal personal, political and theoretical break - and *L'ennemi déclaré* by Jean Genet, who, like Wittig, questioned the links between literature and radical revolution, and to whom the writer herself may have occasionally referred. Review and interview with Sara Garbagnoli and Théo Manton.



The war metaphor really isn't too much to bear, given Wittig's unceasing commitment to the idea of struggle(s). This is precisely the richness of this collection, edited, introduced, and annotated by Sara Garbagnoli, independent researcher, Theo Manton, doctoral student in literature at Harvard: it reveals the multiplicity of fronts on which Wittig has taken a stand. In recent years, her work has been the object of rediscovery - or at least of a renewed, enlarged and even new audiences.

Garbagnoli and Manton have brought together some thirty texts and interviews as rare as they are precious. Rare: while some were known and sometimes difficult to access, others, especially those published abroad, have been completely forgotten. One of them is unpublished, a book project on feminine homosexuality (which we regret was never written). The collection spans 33 years, from 1966, the date of an analysis of Jean-Luc Godard's "lacunar films," to 1999, the year of publication of a very fine interview conducted by Claire Devarrieux for *Libération*. Some of these are collective writings, written as part of the feminist movement.

*Dans l'arène ennemie* is also invaluable: it proves an indispensable companion to Wittig's novels and theoretical essays, firstly by making her voice heard, and secondly by prompting further editions, publications, etc., restoring the way she thought and conceived her work, unfolding the full density of her oeuvre - how she elaborated her projects, linked them together, invested her concerns in various political and cultural spaces and constellations. The coherence of her project is all the stronger for it: fighting against the gender system, the "straight mind," the difference of the sexes that creates classes of men and women, but also fighting within the feminist and homosexual movements for the existence of lesbian identity and culture, Wittig leads a struggle within language, through writing, language being the site of

oppression and domination. As Théo Manton and Sara Garbagnoli remind us, there is a junction between a "materialist analysis of heterosexuality" and a "Sarrautian materialism": "breaking with any individualizing, metaphysical or idealist reading of the body, the latter is with Wittig always already shaped by social relations and the linguistic categories associated with them."



January 30, 1974 demonstration in support of the three Marias. Monique Wittig stands behind the flame.

© Irène Bouaziz

**What portrait of Monique Wittig does this collection paint? What place do you see for it in Wittig's work, and in the perception and apprehension of her trajectory and her work? How does it play a part in Wittig's dense body of work? In my opinion, it plays a major role in showing the great coherence of her work, and at the same time opening up multiple lines of flight that are sometimes not very present in her published work...**

**Théo Manton.** When you put these texts and interviews together, the scope of her work expands prodigiously. It's tempting to say that all of Wittig's work is here! Over the past few years, people have been trying to get a better grasp of the contours of Monique Wittig's life, as witnessed by the recent success of the biographical surveys conducted by Clémence Allezard on the radio, or Émilie Notéris in her "draft" for a biography. In a context where biographical

temptation is strong, the singularity of this collection is to allow Wittig to paint her own self-portrait through her own texts and interviews. Unlike *The Literary Workshop*, whose posthumous publication in 2010 scrupulously followed the last version of the text left by Wittig, *Dans l'arène ennemie* is the first volume published without any indications from her. We wanted to bring together this bio-bibliographical material, which admittedly still needed to be formatted and accompanied, but we opted for a discreet critical apparatus in order to let Wittig's voice resonate. In this book, we see the multiple spaces Wittig traversed, the decisive importance of both the Nouveau Roman and the journal *Questions féministes*, her trajectory from the French literary avant-garde to the American university, her roots in both feminist and lesbian internationalist activism and her exploration of the theory of language... Finally, bringing these texts together also reveals the anchoring of Wittigian summits, both her theoretical and literary work. Until now, Wittig's texts have operated in a kind of vacuum. With this collection, a long-term movement of thought emerges, with its beginnings, its coherence, its leaps and bounds... In fact, in our introduction, we use an image used by Wittig that works with the way we have conceived this volume: hopscotch. You can read *Dans l'arène ennemie* by jumping from one text to the next - that's also the point of the cross-references between notes that dot the book and allow, in addition to a strictly chronological reading, more thematic points of entry.

**How did you go about it? Where did you find these texts? I understand that you worked closely with Wittig's two successors, Sande Zeig and Dominique Samson-Wittig.**

**Théo Manton.** The aim was not to produce an archival book, but one that would be as faithful as possible to Wittig's position on her own work. For this, it was very important to work in collaboration with Sande Zeig, who was Wittig's co-author (*Lesbian Peoples. Material for a Dictionary*, 1979) and companion, as well as Dominique Samson-Wittig, daughter of Gille Wittig, sister of Monique Wittig and one of the co-founders of the feminist movement in France. Throughout the preparation of the volume, they were available to answer our questions and guide us in our choice of texts. The project was also enthusiastically welcomed by other people close to Monique Wittig, Louise Turcotte and Namascar Shaktini, for example, who helped us with the editing of some of the texts Wittig wrote alongside them.

**Sara Garbagnoli.** As most of the texts have already been published, there was discussion of those that would not be retained, as Wittig seems likely to have been keen not to republish some of them, albeit few in number. These are the interviews given at the time of the publication of *L'Opoponax* in 1964, Wittig's first published novel and winner of the Prix Médicis: they certainly provide interesting historiographical material for an investigation into the reception of Wittig's work, but they question her in terms that are exogenous to her approach - the richest texts from this period remain, according to Wittig's own admission, those by Claude Simon, Marguerite Duras, Mireille Boris and Mary McCarthy, all written in support of

*L'Opoponax*. Two other texts also "fell out", to use a Wittigian term, for the same reasons: a very short narrative, "Banlieues", published in 1965, and a short brochure written for an exhibition by artist Léna Vandrey in 1974 and entitled "Parvis de Notre-Dame des Ronces." On the other hand, we have been able to enrich the volume with some genuine unpublished texts. The first is a "Projet pour un livre sur l'homosexualité féminine" (1975) discovered in a file held in the archives of the Beinecke Library (Yale University). Louise Turcotte has also put us on the trail of a previously unpublished interview Wittig gave in August 1982 to Sherry Dranch and Randy Turoff of the American lesbian magazine *Womantide*.

**Théo Manton.** Above all, we were thrilled to be able to include some texts that had been published but forgotten by many. This is particularly true of two important texts from 1974: an open letter from Monique Wittig to Maria Velho da Costa and a long interview in Dutch. In the case of the first text, it was during our preparatory work on the notes for the preface to *Nouvelles lettres portugaises* (to which we'll return later) signed by Wittig and Évelyne Le Garrec, that we gradually learned of the existence of a polemic that had taken place following the trial of the "three Marias," Portuguese feminist writers (all named Maria), and that this polemic had erupted in the columns of the Lisbon newspaper *A Capital*. We consulted the 1974 issues in Lisbon's municipal newspaper library, and were moved to discover an open letter signed by Monique Wittig!

At the end of the note of intent for a book project on female homosexuality that we've already mentioned, Wittig writes of her plan to collect several interviews, one of which appeared in a Dutch newspaper. We were intrigued by this mention. We groped our way through a series of keyword searches in Dutch, and came across an archive platform belonging to Lesbian Nation, a group of Dutch political lesbians, where a more precise reference to the newspaper *Vrij Nederland* was available and enabled us to identify the issue concerned.

***Dans l'arène ennemie* is abundant, but it is possible to identify two or three main axes that run through it, if we are to try and group the texts: the genesis of a feminist movement, the affirmation of a women's class in the early 1970s, and at the same time the construction of a lesbian movement and identity, not without tensions; literature and the project of a political formalism... Let's return, to begin with, to this history of the feminist movement: one of the book's merits is that it restores Wittig's vision and point of view of these early days of the Women's Liberation Movement (MLF), historically, notably through a chronicle of its early days, but also theoretically, conceptually, through materialist thought...**

**Sara Garbagnoli.** - The question of feminism in its dual dimension of movement and theoretical viewpoint on society runs through the entire collection. This shows its centrality in Wittigian thought. Various texts testify to Wittig's theoretical and political contributions to the nascent movement, notably her definition of women as an oppressed class. They also bear witness to her distancing herself from a feminism that she does not hesitate to describe as

"heterofeminist" when it loses sight of its goal, which is - let's not forget - a revolutionary one: the pulverization of the categories of sex and gender and the construction of a new concept of the human. By opposing the reconstructions of the origins of the French Women's Liberation Movement (MLF) proposed by Antoinette Fouque, leader of the differentialist tendency, and by bringing to light the profound antagonisms running through the feminist movement, Wittig's reconstruction pluralizes the narratives on its origin and functioning, and above all, on the violence that ran through it, particularly around the issue of lesbian visibility. Her analyses reveal the importance of history, seen not as a linear, univocal narrative, but as a genuine political issue. Wittig reminds us, on the one hand, that those who write history contribute to making it, and on the other, that present and future struggles can only gain in radicality by feeding on the memory of past struggles.

**The collection returns in particular to the tensions raised by the lesbian question within the feminist movement... whether in the early days of the Women's Liberation Movement or, in the late 1970s, with the break-up of the journal *Questions féministes*. Wittig returns to this in several places. "Women were afraid of being discredited by their presence and, above all, they thought that lesbians had no right to speak out because they weren't real women," she recalls in 1973. "We weren't real women with real women's problems," she describes shortly afterwards.**

**Sara Garbagnoli.** - From the early 1970s, Wittig denounced the strong resistance within the MLF to the emergence of a lesbian political voice, as Louise Turcotte and Ilana Eloit have shown. In 1971, Wittig and a few other lesbian activists founded the Gouines Rouges (Red Dykes) collective in response to a desire to escape the invisibilization to which lesbians were structurally subjected within the feminist movement, but also within the ranks of the emerging homosexual movement. From the end of 1974, Wittig was involved in the creation of a Lesbian Front, both in France and internationally. Texts from the collection reveal the effects of heterosexual feminists' opposition to the empowerment of lesbian activists on Wittig's life, and enable us to grasp the political meaning of this resistance. By denaturalizing the category "woman" and attacking heterosexuality as a totalitarian political regime, lesbians would undermine the foundations of the feminist movement. Well, for Wittig, the exact opposite is true: only the adoption of a lesbian point of view would enable the feminist movement to pursue its revolutionary goal of creating "another universe", "another world" - both expressions recur repeatedly in the texts.

**A cross-examination with Christine Delphy is also particularly interesting in this respect...**

**Sara Garbagnoli.** The interview was given to the American feminist monthly *Off Our Backs* just after the congress organized in New York in September 1979 to mark the thirtieth anniversary of Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. Wittig intervenes at the end to denounce the oppression suffered by lesbian activists within the MLF: invisibilization, contempt, isolation.

In the interview you refer to, Christine Delphy plays down Wittig's analysis, to which she replies vibrantly: "Oh, Christine, you don't want to listen. We have to listen to this oppression." This exchange was the precursor to the forthcoming split in the *Questions féministes* editorial team. It's also worth recalling that, at the same Beauvoir conference, an intervention by Hélène Cixous, who declared that in France we didn't use the word "lesbian," provoked Wittig's fury. *Dans l'arène ennemie* provides readers with a wealth of material documenting how Wittig has consistently resisted the violence of lesbians' repeated erasure, both in struggle and in theory.

**I was struck by Wittig's numerous references to male homosexual culture. She hammers it home: male homosexuality is endowed with an ancient, strong culture, which female homosexuality does not have, and which needs to be invented, constituted... "There is no such thing as culture. There is no lesbian culture, no lesbian cruising grounds." (1974) In a magnificent text, the unpublished 1975 draft of a book on female homosexuality, Wittig insists on the historical invisibilization of lesbians: "This police repression, male homosexuals have known about it for a long time, they face it every day. [...] Because it fights them, society admits that they exist. [...] There is another method of rejection, more effective than the first: ignorance, censorship, the conspiracy of silence."**

**Sara Garbagnoli.** - Wittig is well aware of the positional proximity between sexual minorities. Both homosexual men and women are inferiorized by the relations of domination in force in the heteronormative world in which we live. She is keen, however, to emphasize how lesbianism and male homosexuality have historically experienced two different forms of repression and, therefore, violence. Such an analysis is based on her materialist vision of the sexes, which, far from being natural groups, are classes born of asymmetrical social relations. In such a paradigm, homosexual men, by virtue of their socialization, can be considered, by certain aspects of their social life, to belong to a dominated fraction of the dominant class. Similarly, lesbians constitute a fraction of the female class which, while invisibilized, is not subject to private appropriation by the male class. Hence their strategic advantage in formulating a point of view on the social world capable of undermining the material and ideological foundations of heterosexuality. Without wishing to pit stigmatized groups against each other, Wittig proposes a non-culturalist analysis of minority cultures - they are always historical and transitory responses to relations of domination - as well as a constructivist and antagonistic vision of gender groups.

**You've unearthed previously unpublished documents on an exciting moment: the affair of the "three Marias", solidarity with Portuguese feminists, and a violent controversy...**

**Sara Garbagnoli.** - Just fifty years ago, Maria Teresa Horta, Maria Isabel Barreno and Maria Velho da Costa, three Portuguese writers, were put on trial for their epistolary novel, *Nouvelles lettres portugaises* (New Portuguese Letters), which the Salazarist regime's prosecutors deemed "incredibly pornographic and offensive to public morals" due to its content (which

included abortion and decolonization). The three Marias enlisted the support of French feminists, and Monique Wittig was the first to raise the issue in the media. On television on May 14, 1973, she challenged Françoise Giroud, then director of L'Express, to cover the affair...

**Théo Manton.** - As Maira Abreu shows in a recent article, the Latin American feminist community in Paris quickly seized on the affair, giving it international resonance. The following month, they met feminists from twenty-seven countries at the National Organization for Women convention in Boston. On this occasion, the case of the three Marias was declared "the first international feminist cause." This was followed by mobilizations all over the world, and things gathered pace in April 1974, when the dictatorial regime fell. In May, the three Marias were finally acquitted. In the note for the French edition of *Nouvelles lettres portugaises*, which Wittig co-wrote with Évelyne Le Garrec, and which we reproduce in the volume, they open their text with these words: "This book is a symbol. By its history. By the way we and other women have approached it. By the international feminist movement it has inspired. And, above all, by the very fact that it exists today, here."

The case was followed, however, by an as yet undocumented polemic pitting Maria Isabel Barreno, defended by Wittig, against Maria Velho da Costa, who rejects the international feminist movement that supported them until their acquittal. Open letters were exchanged in the newspaper *A Capital*. Velho da Costa first denounces the appropriation of the book by international feminist movements (her animosity towards feminism is symptomatic of a leftism that also exists in France, and which Wittig denounces in other texts in the collection). In her response, Barreno recalls that it was the French MLF that the three of them had decided to call for help, and that the support they received from it was decisive in the solidarity movement that weighed in their favor. In response to this controversy, Wittig wrote a letter to Velho da Costa, defending the internationalist horizon of feminist struggles. We've included this letter in *Dans l'arène ennemie* because of the tensions it crystallizes between feminism and class struggle, but also as testimony to Wittig's visceral commitment to building international solidarities.

**Let's talk about Wittig's literary project. For her, "there are words that kill," as the title of an exchange in the volume reminds us. Wittig insists: "Language exists materially." How do these texts help us understand Wittig's formal project more precisely? She also speaks of the "transgression" constituted by "women taking the floor," of the "production of a feminine counter-text" that "disrupts historical and social reality"... The "problem of language" is omnipresent in *Dans l'arène ennemie*. What does the collection contribute to our understanding of this project?**



**Sara Garbagnoli.** - For Wittig, language is built on sexual bi-categorization: this lies at the heart of the prevailing naturalistic perceptual system. For that language is the primary vehicle for reproducing the belief in the naturalness of the sexes. This reproduction is achieved by incorporating categories into gestures and bodily automatisms. The categories of the "straight" world ("man", "woman", "difference", etc.) are bludgeons that strike and wound the bodies and minds of sexual minorities. As underlined by the research of Claire Michard, to whom we would like to pay homage here, Wittig's work as a writer consisted in doing violence to this language that does violence to minority groups, in making it say what it was not constituted to say: what lies beyond the categories of sex and gender. For Wittig, language is not only a factor of constraint, a vector that reproduces the order of the world, it is also a tool for the construction of a freedom to come, a site that minority writers can invest to bring into existence the unthinkable, that which does not yet have a name. Herein lies the major role of "Trojan horse makers" that Wittig attributes to them. By breaking into the enemy arena with "counter-texts", minority writers de-heterosexualize the literary canon and alter the boundaries and very shape of that arena.

**Théo Manton.** - The collection reminds us that Wittigian analysis of language is inseparable from its literary practice. And just as well, since we're no longer just reading Wittig's theoretical essays, we're also rediscovering her literary masterpieces: although difficult, "you read *Le Corps lesbien* and you read it without skipping a line", remarks Nathalie Quintane in a recent essay, before adding: "You'll read *Le Corps lesbien* whatever it costs you, comrade." This cost is that of form as a force, as violence done to the reader, a productive and necessary violence for extracting oneself from the categories of straight language. Indeed, Wittig conceives of literary space as a place conducive to the "clash of words," an expression she takes from Pierre Klossowski, symptomatic, in her view, of all true literary innovation. In several texts, she refers to Rimbaud's lines: "There's a bird in the woods / Its song stops you and makes you blush". Words stop us not by what they symbolically signify, but by their material presence, when they strike us as words, and not as vectors of a meaning that precedes them. For Wittig, it's a question of investing this material power in a political way. It may be a question of a word's frequency (an *elles* so rarely used in general or, as Wittig writes, "in the human"), its "palatable" aspect (Wittig's Anglicism), i.e. its presence in the mouth (the opoponax as sesame to a lesbian world), its typographic layout (the crossed-out j/e, which exalts the lesbian subject, or the word boards of *Le Corps lesbien*, which remove it from the heterosexual anatomical gaze) or its syntactic illegibility, such as the phrases of her poem "Un moie est apparu..." which opens onto another universe. "

***Dans l'arène ennemie* also offers a journey into Wittig's literary and artistic corpus: Flaubert, Godard, to name but a few... This is also one of the book's richness: to show**

**Wittig's library of references, and the way it accompanied her, profoundly, in the writing of her books. It's striking that, when asked in 1986 to name the writers who influenced her, she replies: "My favorite poets weren't women when I started writing, but Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Nerval, Verlaine, Lautréamont, Rimbaud..."**

**Théo Manton.** Although these masculine references (although for Wittig, Baudelaire is "the" lesbian poet) may come as a surprise today, Wittig finds in them writers' gestures, radical in that they undermine any conventional relationship to language and representation. Wittig's literary and artistic corpus anchors her deeply in the formal debates of her time. A real theoretical and artistic issue in the 1960s-1970s, the question of discontinuity was addressed by Wittig through the works of Jean-Luc Godard and Gustave Flaubert. Her 1966 essay on Godard's films, which she describes as lacunar, largely anticipates the analyses of the interstice and the interval that Deleuze would provide years later. (Wittig went on to make lacunae the modus operandi of her revolutionary gesture in *Les Guérillères* in 1969, which she conceived in terms of montage operations, as in cinema. She uses the concept of lacuna again in her figuration of lesbianism - for example, in "Un moie est apparu..." in 1973). With regard to Flaubert, to whom she dedicated an essay in 1967, she was not alone in rereading him at this time: Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet and Butor, to name but a few, questioned the second-rate position to which the author of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* was still relegated in the face of the reigning figures of realism (Balzac and Stendhal). Wittig's Flaubert is wary of things in themselves: for him, everything is a matter of relationships - a harbinger of Wittig's future materialism, in which sex is apprehended as a relationship rather than a quality. In *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, as in Godard, discontinuity is a technique for challenging the conventions of representation. In Godard's case, it's the image of an absolute cinema that replaces types and plots; in Flaubert's, it's the encyclopedic form of the novel that no longer allows us to exhaust culture, but to question the relationships that govern its perception. In fact, Wittig's readings enable her to question the regime of representation, and, through the interplay of technique, to develop a critical point of view. A veritable toolbox for her future projects...

**Then there's Virginia Woolf, whose importance Wittig describes, but whose lack of familiarity with the feminist movement she also regrets...**

**Sara Garbagnoli.** Absolutely, Woolf was a decisive influence for Wittig (in this respect, the nod to *The Lesbian Body* in Paul B. Preciado's film *Orlando* (2023) is not surprising. Not only did Wittig repeatedly take up the Woolfian figure of the domestic angel whom women must kill in order to write, but Woolf's materialistic conception of sexes brings her closer to Wittig...

Another writer of major importance to Wittig was Nathalie Sarraute. *Le Chantier littéraire*, published posthumously in 2010 by Presses universitaires de Lyon, showed her fundamental role in Wittig's theorization of her own work on language. Several texts in the collection help to clarify these links, and you have chosen to publish an interview between them in the appendix.

**Théo Mantion.** - For Wittig, Sarraute is the "genius of the century," "the first writer, unique in her genre, to have written entirely on the side of language." Sarraute highlighted what happens when we talk to each other, how reality is shaped and contested by and in language. Wittig returns to Sarraute's work at length, and the reading she offers is very fine, very radical. It's also interesting to see how important the Wittigian reading of Sarraute is today, thanks in particular to the work of Annabel Kim and Chloé Jacquesson. It is striking to note, for example, that the articles by these two researchers appeared in *Nathalie Sarraute aujourd'hui*, a volume co-edited by Ann Jefferson - herself in charge of the 1996 Pléiade edition of Sarraute's *Œuvres complètes*, whose notice only timidly mentioned Wittig. The four articles on Sarraute that appear in *Dans l'arène ennemie* make it possible to circulate these analyses, which renew and radicalize our reading of Sarraute's work.

**Sara Garbagnoli.** Sarraute and Wittig maintained an intimate friendship for over thirty years. Along with Sande Zeig, Wittig spent many summers at Sarraute's home in Chérence. It was there, in fact, that she conducted the interview we have appended to this collection.

**Jérôme Lindon, from Éditions de Minuit, published Wittig's first four books. *Paris-la-politique et autres histoires* (1999), *La Pensée straight* (2001) and *Le Chantier littéraire* (2010) were subsequently published by P.O.L, Balland and Presses universitaires de Lyon respectively. What was the point of publishing this collection with Minuit?**

**Théo Mantion.** When they parted ways in autumn 1998, following a final withdrawal from Jérôme Lindon (who had refused to publish the volumes you mentioned), Wittig wrote to Lindon: "I haven't forgotten what you've done for me, especially for *L'Opoponax*", before going on to say, a few weeks later: "Minuit is where I wanted to be, and [...] authors feel that the house that publishes them is also a little like their own." Thanks to Éditions de Minuit's manifest commitment to the rediscovery of Monique Wittig's work, she is back on rue Bernard-Palissy, exactly sixty years after the publication of *L'Opoponax*.

**Monique Wittig, *Dans l'arène ennemie. Textes et entretiens (1966-1999)*, edited by Sara Garbagnoli and Théo Mantion, Éditions de Minuit, 368 pages, 22 euros.**

***Virgile, non* (1985) is also published in pocket format in Minuit's "Double" collection.**

